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AUTHOR Caldwell, William E.; Daywalt, Ralph E.
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ABSTRACT

Two private-sector models of organizational conflict that are appropriate and adaptable to the public sector are the bargaining and bureaucratic models. While the bargaining model covers conflicts among interest groups in competition for scarce resources, the bureaucratic model covers superior-subordinate conflicts. In the public education sector, these two models can be illustrated in collective bargaining between school boards and teachers' organizations and in relationships between school boards, superintendents, principals, and teachers. In a field study based on interviews with management and teacher organizational leaders in five geographically selected Pennsylvania school districts involved in strikes of 20 or more days in the 1970's, previous case study research with both private- and public-sector models was extended. Analyses of employee/management relationships before, during, and after initial collective bargaining activity on the part of teachers' organizations in the five districts studied supported a pattern of change, similar to previous models, that consists of five phases: (1) preconflict, (2) low (escalating) conflict, (3) high conflict, (4) transition, and (5) mutual accommodation. (JBM)

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A Model for the Prediction of Organizational Conflict

By

William E. Caldwell
Associate Professor
Division of Education Policy Studies
The Pennsylvania State University

and

Ralph E. Daywalt
Cumberland Valley, Pennsylvania

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Introduction

The enactment of Act 195 in 1970 allowed public school teachers in Pennsylvania to organize for the purpose of collective bargaining. Further, the Act legitimated teacher strikes after certain impasse conditions were met through a "limited right to strike provision."

Following the enactment of this legislation, the decade of the seventies reflected an increasing degree of conflict between teacher organizations and school boards as measured by the occurrence of teacher strikes. Such strikes have occurred in over one-third of the public school districts and leave interrupted student learning, and increased discord within communities. A definite need, therefore, exists for the reduction of conflict between employees and management in the public schools of Pennsylvania. If the negative elements of high conflict and the pattern of conflict development can be better understood and managed by the parties, one positive result might be a reduction in the degree and/or the frequency of occurrence of high conflict.

The purpose of this study was to identify those factors which served to increase, sustain, or decrease conflict in the employee-management relationship.

Models of Organizational Conflict

The theoretical framework of this study is based upon conflict within an organization. Two private sector models of organizational conflict that seem appropriate and are adaptable to the public sector are the bargaining and bureaucratic models. The bargaining model is designed to deal with conflict among interest groups in competition for scarce resources. This model is particularly appropriate for the analysis of labor-management relations, budgeting processes, and staff-line conflicts. The bureaucratic model is applicable to the analysis of superior-subordinate conflicts or, in general, conflicts along the vertical dimensions of a hierarchy.[1]

In the bargaining model, a reasonable measure of the potential conflict among a

set of interest groups is the discrepancy between aggrevated demands of the competing parties and the available resources. Conditions of conflict resolution usually center around attempting either to increase the pool of available resources or to decrease the demands of the parties to the conflict. Each party to the conflict has an interest not only in making the total resources as large as possible, but also in securing as large a share of them as possible for itself.

One of the important characteristics of interest-group conflict is that negotiations are frequently conducted by representatives who face a dual problem. First, the representatives must secure consensus for the negotiated solution among their respective group members. Second, they must compromise between the demands for flexibility by each other and the demands for rigidity by each of their own groups. As the deadline for a solution approaches, the level of perceived conflict increases. Interest-group conflicts are invariably characterized by deadline pressures.[2]

The bureaucratic model is appropriate for the analysis of conflicts along the vertical dimension of a hierarchy; i.e., conflicts among the parties to an authority relation. This model is primarily concerned with the problems caused by institutional attempts to control behavior and the organization's reaction to such control. Vertical conflicts in an organization usually arise because superiors attempt to control the behavior of subordinates, and subordinates resist such control. In the superior-subordinate relationship, the potential for conflict is present when the superior and subordinate have different expectations about the zone of indifference.[3]

Vertical conflict is also related to leadership and role conflict. Instead of seeking to minimize conflict through the use of impersonal rules and emphasis on procedure (bureaucratic model), leadership developments seek to alter the style of leadership by using personal persuasion and group pressures to bring subordinate goals more closely into line with the legitimate goals of the organization. Likert suggests the linking-pin concept and model of four management style systems as examples of

this style of leadership. To be effective, a leader must be able to exert influence upward as well as perform his management functions successfully.[4]

The bargaining and bureaucratic types are only two of many possible conflict models. In the public education sector, both models can be illustrated via the collective negotiations process between the school board and teachers' organization, and the hierarchial relationship from school board to superintendent to principal to teacher. It is important to remember that whenever there is conflict within an organization, it must be managed in order to have an ongoing organization. This is the role of those leaders involved in conflict management within the organization.

Social conflict between organizations, and between leadership groups within organizations, has been an area of research and discussion in administrative science, sociology, political science, and psychology. Coser[5] advanced the proposal that conflict and competition between the various orders, far from endangering integration, help to sew society together. Social conflict was projected to have social functions of a positive nature for the entire group as well as its members.

Lewin discussed the need for group members' militant affirmation of group identity for group survival.[6] Such was the case in the militant behavior of teachers when attempting to gain recognition as a viable entity in the decision-making process. Society at large was unaccommodating to the public sector collective bargaining activity and militant activity became necessary to enhance a group's position as a contributor to the decision-making process. Cunningham[7] urged administrators to contemplate further about how the collective bargaining process can be converted to genuine service as an instrument for educational change. It appeared that group militant behavior referred to by Lewin can be used as an instrument for change as postulated by Cunningham. Coser[8] substantiated the positions of Lewin and Cunningham saying that conflict eliminates the accumulation of blocked and balked hostile dispositions by allowing their free behavioral expression.

Militancy in teacher group behavior has a cohesive tendency for uniting its members for goal fulfillment. Warren[9] said that those who threaten with broader participation, were co-opted, controlled, or fiercely attacked by those in power. An increasing acceptance of contest, rather than collaboration, as an appropriate method for decision-making has evolved in many situations. Conflict appeared to be a natural progression as a result of the unwillingness on the part of the power elite to accept special interest input for bilateral decision-making and the resultant increased cohesion of the outgroup to increase its power. An increase in resistance of one group produced a corresponding increase in group cohesion and uniform action on the part of the second group. Reduction of conflict in intergroup behavior is possible and desirable for promotion of societal goals.

Theoretical Framework

The public sector employee/management relationships models generated by the Chichura[10] and Shildt[11] case studies are the theoretical basis of this study. The foundation of their research evolved from an earlier case study by Whyte[12] in a private sector setting where management and employees experienced a great deal of conflict over a period of time, but were eventually able to resolve most of their differences through cooperative efforts. Whyte based his theory on the four abstrct terms: activities, interaction, sentiments, and symbols.[13] Whyte selected these terms because of their workability and not by their inclusiveness; he sought only to account for the behavior he was attempting to explain. A change in any one of the four terms leads to changes in the other three. Each term is, therefore, mutually dependent upon the other three. The four terms did define theoretical limits that enabled one to rationally collect and analyze data from a field study and form logical conclusions concerning the patterns of interactions between the parties.

In Homans' study of five various social groups ranging from industrial workers to street gangs to Pacific Islanders, he considered three elements of behavior: activities,

interactions, and sentiments.[14] He used these interdependent concepts to describe the behavior of people in groups. Activities are the tasks that people perform. Interactions are the behaviors that occur between people in performing these tasks. Sentiments are the attitudes that develop between individuals and within groups. Homans argued that while these concepts are separate, they are closely related and are, in fact, mutually dependent upon each other. In any organization, certain activities, interactions, and sentiments are essential, or required from its members, if it is to survive. Homans' theoretical statements closely parallel those of Whyte's. Whyte states that although he worked independently of Homans, each has "arrived at theoretical statements that are markedly similar at important points."[15]

Whyte's study over a period of time at Chicago's Inland Steel Container Company plant focused on changes occurring in the four mutually dependent variables and the analysis of which factor produced changes in the other three at a given moment. In looking for these changes, Whyte divided the interaction of management and employees into three patterns or periods of time: disorganized conflict, organized conflict, and organized cooperation.[16]

From Whyte's observations of these three patterns in the private industrial sector, Chichura and Shildt identified comparable periods of time when conflict occurs in the public sector, specifically school districts. The periods were labeled tranquility (preconflict), low conflict, high conflict, transition, and mutual accommodation. Chichura's case study documented a school board's and teacher organization's pattern of conflict from a period of tranquility through conflict to mutual accommodation. He also identified those employee/management factors of activities, interaction, sentiments, and symbols associated with each period. Shildt's case study paralleled Chichura's except that after brief periods of transition and/or accommodation, the two parties resumed their adversarial relationship by moving toward another period of high conflict.

This study sought to refine Chichura's and Shildt's case study research by examining those factors which produce school district organizational conflict as reflected in collective bargaining in a field study.

Research Procedures

Five school districts were identified that had experienced a bitter strike of 20 or more days during the 1974-77 period. This enabled the reserachers to collect data during pre and post strike periods in addition to the conflict period. Consideration was given to the geographical locations of the districts within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania. The sample was selected so as to represent northwest, north central, central, east central, and southeast Pennsylvania, in districts of varying size and wealth. Further, the districts were selected in order to represent varying degrees of conflict between the parties. While all districts experienced the single long strike (20 days or more) during the 1974-77 period, the five districts differed in respect to their conflict patterns: two districts had no other period of high conflict during the 1970's; two districts had a short strike during the esculating conflict period, (1970-74); and one district had a total of three strikes during the decade.

Following the identification of a small group of districts meeting all of the above criteria, the final districts were selected in the basis of the voluntary participation and availability of two or more represenatives of the leadership of both parties. The primary method of collecting data for the study consisted of extended interviews with a minimum of two management leaders and two teacher organizational leaders who held power during the 1974-77 period. The individuals were directly involved in the collective bargaining between the parties since 1970 and particularly during the base period year that resulted in the extended strike. By means of an interview schedule and a follow-up questionnaire, data were obtained that charted a sequence of events relating to both conflict and non-conflict situations and which emphasized the interpersonal relationships between those actively engaged in the bargaining process

including their activities and attitudes. Study data were only utilized when consensus was apparent.

Findings

This study attempted to build a generalized public school district employee/management relationship model for the understanding and management of collective bargaining conflict. The field study extended and modified previous case study research with both private and public sector models. The data analyses supported a pattern of change from pre-conflict, to strife, to accommodation in the five districts and was similar to previous models. Specific factors associated with the five periods of change were evident in the study and are detailed in Figure 1.

The preconflict period was dominated by the authoritative leadership of superintendents and/or school boards. Unilateral decision-making prevailed and teachers tacitly accepted. There was little organizational activity and interaction between the teachers and the board. Although teachers had limited informal input in the areas of salaries and benefits, their influence was generally confined to curriculum development, textbook selections, and in-service planning. Sentiments between the parties were not visible because communications were low. Teachers accepted the status quo of the district and upheld its reputation with their professionalism.

With collective bargaining sanctioned after 1970 and an increasing number of young, aggressive teachers moving into positions of teacher leadership, the labor relations between teachers and school boards moved into a new era. Teachers, through their professional associations, increasingly sought input into the area of decision-making at the board level. School boards were reluctant to relinquish any of their managerial authority and unilateral power. The stage for conflict between the two parties was now established as a result of the legitimation of collective bargaining.

In the five districts studied, a pattern of factors emerged that increased conflict in the employee/management relationships. Teachers geared up their organizational

activities, attempted to make inputs at the board level, and questioned management decisions. The school boards countered this teacher activism by attempting to increase their managerial authority via a more bureaucratic administration and formal responses to teacher organization demands. Communications between the two sides occurred more frequently, but closure on teacher concerns became difficult. An adversarial relationship was building during this low conflict period.

Although events in each of the five districts may have differed, behavior patterns between the sides escalated conflict toward a more severe stage. Sentiments reflected this escalation as they became increasingly negative. The struggle for power began. Teachers desired power and boards feared losing it. Each side viewed actions by the other as a symbolic rallying point. Issues that were not resolved in earlier contracts reappeared in future proposals. A lack of trust existed between the leaders on each side. Regardless of what each party attempted, the conflict escalated. In three districts short strikes occurred as bargaining sessions became more conflictual and the initial agreements reached with travail. A long, bitter teachers' strike seemed inevitable and occurred in each district within four to six years after Act 195 became law. The extended strikes represented the high point of labor relations conflict between the teachers and school board.

During the period of high conflict, both sides increased their level of activities to counteract each other. When teachers returned to classes without a settlement, they worked to rule and filed grievances. Bargaining sessions increased in number early into the strike, but lessened as the strike lengthened. Positions hardened on each side. Key issues were identified by each party, but little or no movement toward compromise or settlement occurred. Conflict was sustained between the parties.

Many bargaining sessions were conducted by mediators, fact-finders, or judges in which the neutrals attempted to deal with each party in caucus. Face-to-face bargaining was limited. Communications between the sides were virtually nonexistent.

Attendance by the general public and teachers at board meetings increased as the conflict increased, but returned to normalcy once the strike ended. Feelings between the parties were highly negative. Trust was lacking. Boards remained united to punish the teachers for their behavior. Teachers remained united to avoid compromising to board pressures. Key leaders in the conflict emerged and were visible symbols of conflict. Both sides searched for means of ending their dilemma without sustaining a loss. The strikes eventually stopped, teachers returned to classes, and settlements were reached. Both sides had enough conflict. It was time for a change in behavior away from conflict and toward accommodation.

Toward the end of the strike year, movement away from high conflict had started in each district. The renewal of communications between the parties on a regular basis improved the labor relationships, but tended to occur at low levels. That is, communication for operational purposes between teachers and principals increased as the conflict abated and began to form a basis for more positive sentiments. Very little activity took place between the leadership of the groups. As the symbols of conflict disappeared, (issues resolved and leadership turnover) the negative sentiments dissipated. As the composition of the boards changed, new leadership provided the impetus for the resolving of differences between the parties. Activities on each side were of a nature to heal the wounds caused by conflict. A transition from conflict to cooperation had started in each district. Some mutual respect and trust developed between the parties. Joint interaction occurred more regularly to resolve district and teacher concerns. The transition phase ended when new leaders began their tenure or when new contracts were successfully negotiated without another period of high conflict.

As each district moved into an accommodation period, conflict diminished between the parties, but was not completely eliminated. Each side managed conflict more effectively and avoided any transition toward increased conflict. Joint

activities, and frequent and cooperative problem solving occurred. Each side became more accepting of the legitimacy of the other and additional contracts were successfully negotiated that were characterized by good faith bargaining. The sentiments between the parties became more positive and fewer leadership changes provided continuity and stability to each organization during this period. A transition from conflict to mutual accommodation resulted in the five districts. The observed behaviors of both parties to the labor relationships during each of the periods reinforced many of the theoretical concepts proposed by the research.

	ACTIVITIES	INTERACTION	SENTIMENTS	SYMBOLS
PRECONFLICT PERIOD	Low level of activity	Low joint interaction	Mixed	Tradition
T. O.	Little or no organizational activity.	Teachers tacitly accept board decisions.	No visible conflict to test sentiments.	Acceptance of status quo.
MGMT.	High superintendent leadership; board member, superintendent longevity.	Unilateral decision making by board.		
LOW (ESCALATING) CONFLICT PERIOD	Increased activity to structure and initiate.	Increased interaction increasing conflict.	Increasingly negative, fear of loss.	The issues
T. O.	Teacher organization promotes self-interest activities; question management decisions plus try to make inputs at board level.	Joint meetings on self-interest concerns, with difficulty in reaching closure; plus more joint meetings; less listening between the parties, limited communications.	Teacher need for power and fear of security and status loss; alienation from superintendent and board.	An action which is unilateral or self-serving and can be used as a rallying point, and/or a leader whose actions or positions are inflexible and directional so as to be used as a rallying point.
MGMT.	Board increases authority; becomes more formal in response to teachers' input (bureaucratic).		Board fear of losing power; desire by board to keep teachers in their place.	

		ACTIVITIES	INTERACTION	SENTIMENTS	SYMBOLS
HIGH CONFLICT		High level to overthrow.	High joint interaction in conflict.	Highly negative	The struggle for power.
	T. O.	Increased association activity; teacher strikes.	Increased attendance by public and teachers at board meetings; increased press coverage; increased number of bargaining sessions at beginning of strike; third party intervention to resolve impasse.	Teachers attempt to restore professional image and gain inputs into the system.	Visibility of key issues. Visibility of key individuals in the struggle for power - teacher association leaders, superintendent, board members, and chief negotiators.
	MGMT.	Increased board self-interest activity; board refusal to bargain.	Virtually no communications between the parties.	Board attempt to maintain unilateral control and to reduce militancy by force.	

	ACTIVITIES	INTERACTION	SENTIMENTS	SYMBOLS
TRANSITION PERIOD	Low level of top directed activity	Low at top levels increased at lower levels	Mixed, re-evaluation	Disappearance of conflict issues and personalities
T. O.	New or low profile leadership in teachers' association.	Improved communications between the parties at operational levels (teacher-principal): established joint committees to resolve district and teacher concerns; plus regular meetings.	Much negative sentiment dissipates as the symbols of conflict are removed or replaced. More positive sentiments are associated with new leaders, activities, and improved communications.	
MGMT.	New leadership and membership on school board and/or superintendent turnover. Activities are of a nature to heal wounds.			
MUTUAL ACCOMMODATION	Medium level of activities.	High level of interaction.	High positive sentiments between the parties.	Both parties mutually supporting; growing trust.
	Joint activities Successful negotiations Low leadership turnover.	Frequent and cooperation problem solving at low and high organizational levels; joint committees functioning. Movement toward bilateral decision-making.	Trust developing between the parties.	

*T. O. = Teacher Organization, MGMT = Management

Notes

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15 Whyte, p. viii.

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